

## **RH morning –**

This year I, like many of my colleagues, am a little anxious about my Rosh Hashanah sermons. Why are we so worried? It has been such a difficult year for the Jewish community and at the same time we have, I think, never been so divided about what we think the issues really are, and how we think we need to move forwards. Sometimes it feels like whatever you say, someone is going to get upset. I want us to remember that we are in this together, this life, this complicated thing of being Jews in a predominantly non-Jewish world. We need to grant each other the space to be imperfect, the courage to be vulnerable and the grace to be human.

It has been two years since October 7<sup>th</sup>. It is still painful. Israeli hostages are still being held in horrific conditions, families are still grieving their loved ones. But we are also watching daily the devastating death and destruction in Gaza. Whatever your political perspective, whoever you think is at fault, it is deeply painful. And often I think we cover up grief with anger. So we shout at each other, either online, or as happened over the summer at a rally for hostages, boo each other off the stage.

In the Talmud it says that for years the House of Shammai, and the House of Hillel disagreed with each other about a point of halacha. Then eventually a divine voice emerged and said – both these and these are the words of the living God. They both had a point, there



was some truth in both their arguments. But the Divine Voice continued, the halacha goes with the opinion of the House of Hillel. If both arguments were the words of the living God, why did the House of Hillel win the day? Because, the Talmud continues, the House of Hillel were agreeable and humble, and they taught not just their words but also the words of the House of Shammai.

How many of us can say the same thing? How many of us when explaining the current situation can articulate the other side, whatever that might be in your case, as well as your own argument. That doesn't mean there isn't a right and a wrong. The law went with Hillel in the end. But it does mean that sometimes in order to get to the truth we need to acknowledge that there is another narrative, one we may not always agree with, but unless we hear it, there will never be peace.

The crisis in the Jewish world, with the war in Israel and Gaza and the rise of antisemitism as a result, is not a zero sum game. It is not a football match – blue and white on one side, red and green on the other. More than one thing can be true at the same time. We can acknowledge that we are the victims of prejudice and antisemitism, that the Israelis are still suffering AND we can empathise with the death and destruction suffered by innocent people of Gaza, whoever we think is ultimately responsible, because we are made in



the image of God and God is a ruler of mercy and compassion, so we are also compassionate beings.

There's a story that's repeated in the Talmud, to explain why you must stop murder at any cost. A man is threatened by the head of the village who tells him to kill someone or else the chief will kill him. Rabba says: Who is to say that your blood is redder than his, that your life is worth more than the one you want to kill? Perhaps that man's blood is redder? The same blood runs in all our veins.

Today we read about how Abraham sent his older son and mother of his child, the Egyptian Hagar, into the desert, how the mother and child ran out of water, and Hagar thought they were going to die until God sends an angel to open her eyes, see a well of water, and promises to make Ishmael into a great nation. Tomorrow we learn how Abraham almost kills his second son, Isaac, but is saved at the last moment, by an angel telling him not to kill his son, as he believed God had wanted him to do, and he sacrifices a ram instead.

Isaac and Ishmael's lives are both saved because their parents looked up at the right moment and found a solution that was in fact already there. Like the ram for Isaac and the well for Ishmael, the ways to prevent suffering and loss are built into the world around us. We just need to see where the possibilities for peace and reconciliation lie, even if they're difficult to see right now.



For Hagar, saving her son Ishmael requires her to acknowledge her despair, ask for help, and lean into hope. She shows great courage in a desperate moment and can perhaps serve as a role model in how to move forward in a broken world. It's a challenging task - but if it were easy, we wouldn't still be telling these stories thousands of years later.

After these stories, Isaac and Ishmael do not speak again - or at least we don't read about it. The decades that follow are said to be full of distance between them. And yet, Isaac and Ishmael do come together to bury Abraham, so we know that some reconciliation and healing must have taken place. It's a lesson in the possibility of moving forward from violence to healing. We know we can reach that place in our own world - we just need to write the story that gets us there.

Rosh Hashanah is one of our most universal festivals. It's the birthday of the world, actually the anniversary of the conception of the world, Yom Harat Olam. It's all about life and it's about new beginnings when anything can happen. Our Torah reading tells us about the birth of Isaac and Sarah's joy at late motherhood. Our Haftarah is about Hannah who struggled to get pregnant and eventually conceived. Rosh Hashanah is day all about **life**. The Rabbis said that the shofar is like the sound of a woman in labour.



And the last note we'll hear, the Tekiah Gedolah is the last cry before the new year is born.

Every year we get a chance to start again. After today we have ten days to review our life and see what we need to change, what new path we might choose this year.

In our Torah reading, Ishmael does not grow up as his mother planned and as he expected, in Abraham's tribe, as the oldest son. God has other plans for him and he becomes a great nation nevertheless. Sometimes the future doesn't pan out exactly the way we want it too. Sometimes the blessing is somewhere else, somewhere we haven't noticed yet.

We need to look hard to find sparks of hope right now but they are there. The Hebrew word for angel, malach, also means a human messenger, and there are so many of them: peace-makers, those who can empathise with compassion even in difficult circumstances. I met many of them when I was in Israel this year – the father whose son was killed fighting in Gaza in the IDF. The father is a member of Rabbis for Human Rights and when I asked him about it he said – well my son never hated anyone. Rabbi Avi Dabush, who held his shelter door shut for hours as Hamas rampaged through his kibbutz, killing his friends and neighbours, who when he was telling his story added – but it was also very bad for our partners in the West Bank. Nineteen people were killed that day by settlers. The parents of the Bereaved



Families Forum who have lost loved ones and are saying – enough, we don't want anyone else to go through what we have. We are all, descendants of Isaac and descendants of Ishmael, we are all children of Abraham. May we see wells of water beyond the wilderness, light beyond the darkness and hope beyond despair. And may we one day come together in peace to rebuild our hopes for the future, soon and in our time. Ken Yehi ratzon.